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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BANGKOK 001237

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PACOM FOR FPA (HUSO)

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [TH](#)

SUBJECT: SOUTHERN VIOLENCE: FEBRUARY VISIT TO FAR SOUTH

REF: A. BANGKOK 826 (AN EMERGING REALITY ON THE GROUND)

[1](#)B. BANGKOK 296 (INSIDE THE REEDUCATION PROGRAM)

Classified By: Political Counselor Susan M. Sutton. Reason 1.4 (d)

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: During a February 15-16 visit to the far southern provinces of Narathiwat, Pattani, and Songkhla poloffs discussed the influence of radical Islam and other factors behind the violence. They heard continued concern over divisions between the Buddhist and Muslim communities and criticism of the government's "reeducation" program and overall lack of coordination between agencies. They also heard pessimistic assessments of the National Reconciliation Commission's (NRC) progress and discussed the militants' operational structure in Narathiwat. END SUMMARY.

[1](#)2. (C) On February 15-16, poloffs visited the far southern provinces of Narathiwat, Pattani, and Songkhla meeting with: Narathiwat Governor Pracha Terat; Narathiwat Islamic Committee Chairman Abdulrozak Gali; a panel of Islamic studies professors from Prince of Songkhla University (PSU); Dr. Phetdao Tomina, a National Reconciliation Commission (NRC) member and member of one of Pattani's most prominent (and controversial) families; Dr. Ratiya Salae, NRC member and prominent Malay academic; senior executives from the Bank of Thailand's southern office; and Dr. Duncan McCargo, a British academic conducting research out of PSU.

RADICAL INFLUENCE...

[1](#)3. (C) We heard mixed assessment about the role of radical Islam in the southern conflict. Generally our interlocutors were cautious not to overemphasize the role of radical Islam related to the violence. Narathiwat Governor Pracha said the provincial government was attempting to counter the religious propaganda of the separatists. To accomplish this they would focus on education reforms. Recently elected Narathiwat Islamic Committee Chairman Abdulrozak Gali, who assumed office in November 2004, said he would focus his tenure on promoting moderate Islam in Narathiwat. The Committee was working closely with the province's Islamic schools and mosques to establish uniform and "correct" interpretations of the Koran.

[1](#)4. (C) Teachers and schools promoting extremist messages appear to be well known within the Muslim community. Chairman Abdulrozak said the Islamic committee had identified "extremist" teachers in some of the Pondokos but were reluctant to provide these names to authorities because they feared that innocent Muslims would also be arrested. Dr. Ibrahim Narongrakasket from PSU said that there were identifiable extremist Islamic schools in the region. However, they were also reluctant to pass this information to authorities because of fear of a community-wide crackdown. The College of Islamic Studies worked to counter extremist ideology on campus.

...AND OTHER FACTORS BEHIND THE VIOLENCE

[1](#)5. (C) While concerned over the influence of extremism, most of our interlocutors highlighted other factors behind the violence. PSU professor Sarfee Ardam discounted radical Islam as being the prime factor for the violence. He and other PSU professors said the committed militants have a strong separatist agenda, based on historic grievances. NRC member Phetdao Tomina agreed that historic factors and grievances were behind the resurgence of violence. However, she dismissed the importance of the separatists, saying they did not form a cohesive movement. (NOTE: Phetdao is the daughter of Senator Den Tomina, who has been accused of having separatist sympathies and the granddaughter of Haji Sulong Tomina, who is considered to be "the father of Pattani separatism." END NOTE)

[1](#)6. (C) Governor Pracha Terat and PSU Professor Ibrahim said militants often paid youths or criminal gangs -- who were not ideologically motivated -- to carry out attacks. Pracha believed the militants wanted to keep the violence at a steady level in order to create the sense that the government

did not control territory in the South. In several of our meetings we were reminded that a certain amount of the violence involved criminal activities that had no connection to separatist violence -- but were often labeled as such. Overall, our contacts agreed the violence in the South remains a domestic Thai problem.

#### WIDENING DIVISIONS BETWEEN BUDDHISTS AND MUSLIMS

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17. (C) We continued to hear concerns that militants are deliberately trying to create conflict between the Buddhist and Muslim communities. Narathiwat Islamic Committee Chair Abdulrozak said that there is increasing fear between the Buddhist and Muslim communities, and that both sides were pulling away from each other. Governor Pracha confirmed that large numbers of Buddhist teachers from public schools had requested transfers from the province. NRC member Phetdao said the transfer of teachers from government schools was a serious problem as they were being replaced by soldiers.

18. (C) Again we heard anecdotal evidence of Buddhist flight from the region (reftel A). NRC member Phetdao Tomina said she believed that a significant number of Buddhists were leaving the far South or were sending their children north to study. Parnpis Lekhakul and Chairot Thavarorit, senior executives from the Bank of Thailand, noted that real estate prices remain high in Songkhla province due to the continued influx of Buddhists moving from Narathiwat, Pattani, and Yala.

#### PSU BECOMING AN "ISLAMIC UNIVERSITY"

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19. (SBU) A measurable example of "Buddhist Flight" can be seen at Prince of Songkhla University in Pattani. The university is part of the national system and in the past had attracted students from all over Thailand. In 2002 there were twice as many Buddhists students as Muslims at the campus. By 2005 that had changed dramatically -- Buddhists made up only a third of the student body. Duncan McCargo, a visiting professor at PSU from the University of Leeds, said the change around the campus had been dramatic. Since the renewed violence in January 2004 the number of new Buddhist students enrolling has dropped to almost zero. PSU was increasingly feeling like an "Islamic" university. After the current class of junior and seniors graduated, the student body at this state university would be almost exclusively Muslim.

#### REEDUCATION PROGRAM

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10. (C) In December 2005 the government unveiled a new program to publicly identify individuals suspected of involvement in the insurgency and then "invite" them to attend "reeducation" camps (reftel B). During our visit we heard a great deal of concern over this program from Muslims. Islamic Committee Chair Abdulrozak claimed innocent people were being put on the reeducation lists. NRC member Phetdao shared these concerns, warning that personal scores were being settled through the lists. The use of lists to summon individuals to reeducation camps or to arrest them was another source of anger and was increasing the already high levels of mistrust between local Muslims and the government.

11. (C) Predictably, Narathiwat Governor Pracha praised the reeducation program. Pracha said that so far there had been an 80 percent participation rate when suspected individuals were summoned for "reeducation." Arrest warrants were issued for those who failed to appear as that was considered prima facie evidence of involvement in the insurgency. Most of the names on the list come from anonymous tips to local police, Ministry of Interior officials or the Army.

#### FEWER SECURITY FORCES...BETTER COORDINATION

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12. (C) Discussions on how to address the violence focused on "hearts and minds" approaches rather than those involving security forces. Narathiwat Governor Pracha said he did not want additional security forces in his province. He was worried that leaders in Bangkok were overemphasizing a military approach. "Tell Bangkok to keep quiet because they don't understand local conditions." A strategy focused on development of the region was going to pay more dividends in the end.

13. (C) Many of our interlocutors believed poorly coordinated government efforts had contributed to the situation. NRC member Phetdao, echoing the often heard criticism, blamed the Thaksin administration for worsening the situation by disbanding the joint operational commands in 2002, which took away one of the only outlets people had to air grievances to the government. Several of our contacts blamed the government's fragmented and disjointed efforts for failing to ease the crisis.

PROGRESS OF THE NRC

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14. (C) The overall sense in the South, as in Bangkok, is that the government would largely ignore the findings of the NRC and that the report's release in March would have minimal impact on the situation. The NRC members themselves were particularly pessimistic. Phetdao said that the feeling among the majority of NRC members was that the government was unlikely to implement their recommendations. They had resigned themselves that their work would be a historic document that would provide guidance for future governments/generations.

NARATHIWAT "RED ZONES"

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15. (C) Narathiwat Governor Pracha gave us his assessment on how the militants were operationally organized in his province. He said that the militants had divided the province into three zones with operational cells in each. Cell members were disciplined, and maintained good operational secrecy. The government had identified seven key villages believed to be under direct militant "influence," including Tayong Limo in Range district, Choko in Choirong district, Ibatu in Sungai Padi district, and Tiko in Changae. Pracha believed that the militant leaders were in Malaysia. Describing relations with Malaysia he said, "Officially we say they are good, but off the record, they are not." He said that the Malaysian government did not really want peace in the South and blamed the PAS party in Kelantan in particular for encouraging violence in southern Thailand.

COMMENT

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16. (C) Gauging the influence on radical Islam on the violence in the South is difficult. Our on-the-ground observations strengthens our view that radical Islam is not the driving force behind the violence. The overall sense from ethnic Malays is that the main factors provoking anger and violence are much more personal -- such as daily slights or insults from police or memories of government abuse of Muslims at places like Tak Bai -- rather than religious. Committed separatists are manipulating these feelings, and religion, to achieve their objectives. The concerns about the "reeducation" program were predictable. While we heard no indications of abuse from the program, the implementation is clearly adding to the accumulated grievances felt by ethnic Malay-Muslims. END COMMENT  
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